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ABSTRACT

Writing problems in the basic college freshman writing course result from the students' misconception that once they get the required number of words down on paper their compositions are unalterable, and teachers' misconception that serving as an editor, correcting errors and rewriting sentences, is an effective teaching tool. Students' experiences in the writing class should show them how to include proofreading in the writing process. Students often do not know what is wrong or right, often their attitude toward revision lacks confidence, and they do not always have the objectivity toward their writing that is required for proofreading. Teachers must find a way to help students classify their writing problems so that they will know what to look for as they proofread. One principle behind proofreading is to look for only one type of error at a time. A second principle is that proofreading should be separated from other types of editing, such as arrangement of ideas and selection of sentence type. The third principle is that the teacher must gradually withdraw from the proofreading process. The following steps may lead to relatively painless withdrawal from reliance on the teacher: (1) the teacher marks, but does not correct the target error; (2) the teacher can ask students to locate a certain error by proofreading one line only; (3) the teacher notes only the number of errors appearing in each line, so that the student must find and correct the error without knowing what type of error to look for. (HTH)

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BASIC WRITING: PROGRESSIVE PROOFREADING

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (33 rd, San Francisco, CA March 18-20, 1982)

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BASIC WRITING: PROGRESSIVE PROOFREADING

For students who hand in papers full of errors, proofreading is obviously a much-needed skill. While the assault on error is only one aspect of the composition teacher's task, it is certainly a vital one. Although we may teach many aspects of the writing process, the elimination of errors in grammar and mechanics remains at once one of the most obviously important and inaccessible goals of a basic freshman writing course.

Experienced teachers know very well that many of the traditional ideas about curing the error-prone writer simply do not work very well. Exercises do not cure all ills. A student may assiduously complete a hundred subject-verb agreement exercises and still fail to recognize in his own sentences the principle he has just practiced. And how much good do the red marks do? In the teacher's corrections the student can read what he should have written - that is, if he bothers to do so. But instead the student often sees nothing but an indiscriminate blood bath in the marked paper returned to him. After a glance at the grade, the student dismisses the red marks either by ignoring them or by making a disgusted toss toward the wastebasket.

This pattern of behavios results from two misconceptions about writing and the role of the writing teacher. First, the basic writing student often thinks that once he has gotten the required number of words down on paper, his composition is finished. He views it as an unalterable product, and the teacher has the impression that the final draft is nothing but the first draft recopied. However, if the student understands that composition is a never-ending

process, that any author can rework any piece of his writing, that the time when one must stop working on a draft is usually an artificially imposed deadline, then the student may be willing to change what he has written before he submits his paper to the teacher. Writing should be viewed as a process, and proofreading is an important part of that process. A second misconception is that the teacher serves as the student's editor, making corrections, rewriting his sentences, and often obliterating what he has written. Thus trying to be helpful, the English teacher is only contributing to the student's sense of inadequacy by failing to show respect for his writing. At best, he only usurps the student's responsibility for making his own corrections. The teacher's role should be that of a respectful reader who points out problems he sees but encourages the student to gradual independence as his own editor. The student's experiences in the writing class should show him how to include proofreading in the writing process and how to correct mistakes before the paper meets its reader.

Strangely, this step, which seems so easy to the English teacher, is often nearly impossible for students for several reasons. First, they may not know what is correct and what is incorrect. "How can I find a mistake?" a student once asked me. "If I had thought it was wrong, I wouldn't have written it!" To get out of this obvious trap, the student must acquire concepts that will enable him to tell the difference between right and wrong. Certainly, instruction must take place before a student will know how to look for errors. The teacher might begin with textbook exercises, but he should devise in addition some activities which will help the student apply the exercises to his writing.

A second very complicated reason why students can't find their errors is that their attitude toward the task is wrong. Past experience of being abused by red ink, probably deservedly, leads many students to an abject lack of confidence. Statements like, "I know this is wrong, but here it is," mark a student who lacks not only the grammatical tools but also the confidence to examine and correct a sentence. His confidence is further undermined if he has too many problems to tackle at once. If the student is thinking of all the possible ways he could go wrong, he will overlook that -s form verb in spite of all our careful preparation. One step at a time is best.

Thirdly, perceptual development is a factor in the ability to proofread. For any writer, it is very difficult to view objectively what he has written. Certainly the skill crucial in proofreading, as Mina Shaughnessy points out, is the ability to forget the meaning of the words and to look at them only for their grammatical correctness. To train a student's perceptual habits, the teacher may try different techniques: 1) have the student recopy a paragraph on a plastic sheet for the overhead projector 2) xerox his work to make it look less familiar to him; 3) use colored plastic report covers to transfigure the copy; 4) ask the student to read from the end of his paper forward, proofreading the last sentence first.

But even if the ability to read objectively is established, the student may not know what to look for because he does not know what his own weaknesses are. The teacher must find a way to help the student classify his problems so that he will know what type of error to look for the most assiduously as he proofreads.

Finally, the student's inability to spot his own errors, may, ironically enough, be due to the help his teachers have tried to give him by marking his papers. The student may have learned to expect the teacher to find and correct the errors in his paper for him. The red marks relieve him of the burden of responsibility for his work.

Because the reasons behind the failure to proofread are so fundamental, the basic writing teacher must give the students not only the information but also the attitude and the perceptual skills they need in order to find their mistakes. Such training must be deliberately and carefully done. The simple injunction to "look over your papers" is meaningless: the teacher needs an arsenal of strategies to enable and to discipline the students to proofread effectively.

One principle behind learning to proofread is to begin looking for only one type of error at a time. I find it helpful to teach verb forms first. Not only are these forms vulnerable to error, but working with verbs may make the student aware of how sentences are structured. After a unit of study on verb phrases, irregular verbs, and the use of the -s endings, then the student turns to his own paper, first to identify and then to analyze the verbs. He might be assigned to list the subjects with the verbs and to indicate whether they are singular or plural. After this point, he can be held responsible for finding verb errors in one of his papers. For the next assignment, the class can tackle another type of error- the sentence fragment, for example - and add it to the list of errors that they are expected to recognize. As the semester progresses, they acquire a repertoire of problems they know they can spot.

A second principle is that proofreading should be separated from other types of editing, such as arrangement of ideas, choice of words, and selection of sentence type. Sometimes when changes are made for such purposes, erroneous forms disappear as a side-effect. Although for the experienced writer, editing and error-hunting may take place at the same time, the beginning writer needs to concentrate on these tasks one at a time.

To call attention to proofreading as a separate step, the teacher can make a classroom activity of it, devoting an entire class period to it, at least at the beginning of the semester. For the first proofreading session, the class could work on an in-class composition written at the previous class meeting. These papers, being genuinely rough draft and probably error-laden, make good targets for proofreading; and the lapse of time may permit the students to look objectively at their work.

The third principle is that the teacher must gradually withdraw from the proofreading process. I have discovered that by changing the system of marking papers as the semester progresses, the teacher may give the student a chance to become independent, discovering and correcting errors before the teacher sees them.

I have found that the following steps may lead to relatively painless withdrawal from reliance on the teacher. In progressive steps the instructor changes his method of annotation to give increasingly more responsibility to the student. Each change may take place after one or more assignments depending on the total number of compositions in the course and the level of the students.

Step One. The teacher marks but does not correct the target error (or all the errors, depending on how much the class can handle at once) by writing the abbreviation of the type of error above the word. The

student's response is simply to correct the error, a task which the content of the exercises and course materials should have prepared him to do. At this stage the student is finding out which kinds of errors he is personally most likely to make. He is also learning about the categories of errors and the meaning of the abbreviations.

Step Two. Once the instructor is reasonable sure that the students know what to look for, he can ask them to locate a certain error by proofreading one line only. In the margin of the line where the error appears, the instructor writes the label abbreviation of each error according to its type. The student now must find the error in the line before he can make a correction. The purpose of this stage is to teach the student that to proofread means to look at the words, not for their meaning, but simply for their correctness. Learning how to do this with one line at a time is a logical preliminary step for proofreading an entire paper. In order to make it clear to the student which are the errors that I expect him to be able to find, I reserve the left hand margin for the proofreading marks. All the error labels appear in the left hand margin; other comments may appear elsewhere on the page.

Step Three. At this stage the teacher's notes do not identify the type of error but only the number of errors in each line. In the margin of the line where errors appear, the teacher places a check for each word that contains an error. The student now has an added responsibility: he must find and correct the error without knowing what type of error he is looking for. By this time he has had enough experience with his own compositions to have developed some sense of what errors he is likely to make.

The next step is to move the student away from line-by-line clues to clues that ask him to proofread a larger unit of his composition. In my basic writing class, short paragraph assignments permit me to move right away to annotations only at the end of the composition. The fourth step is to tally the occurrences of each type of error at the end without markin the error in the student's text at all. Obviously, now the student must rely on the proofreading skill he has acquired in the first three phases. I advise the class at this point to proofread the composition for one type of error at a time. If four verb forms are wrong, for example, the student should examine all the verbs first. Then he may look for the misspelled words, or whatever type of error is listed next. Again, the idea is to reinforce the ability to divorce the words from their meaning in order to notice errors.

The next step is the most difficult yet. Now the teacher removes the list of error categories and gives only a tally of the total number of errors at the end of the composition. To find errors with this clue, the student must be well prepared in the following skills: 1) he must know the difference between the grammatical and mechanical errors he is expected to recognize (those noted in the left-hand margin) and the other problems- such as diction or transitions- which the teacher can continue throughout these steps to mark in the text of the papers. Secondly, he must have learned about his own skills. He must remember his earlier errors in order to anticipate what the tally marks mean. Thirdly, he must be able to evaluate his paper line by line objectively in order to find the errors. Because this step is so demanding, I often find that after trying it once, I need to return the class to Phase Two or Three again in order to reinforce their skills. But by

the second try with this annotation technique, many of the students can find most of the errors tallied.

The last step is independent proofreading. The teacher makes no marks, no tallies; the student cleans up the paper before handing it in. This step admittedly seems rather illogical. We are back to square one, in a way. The student no doubt thought his first paper in the semester was correct when he handed it in. But by now there should be some big differences in the student's preparation for the task of correcting his paper:

1) He perceives proofreading as a real step in the writing process. Looking for errors is separate from evaluating the meaning in his paper.

2) He has been instructed about problems with sentences and knows what the correct forms are. His own skills have grown so that by now he may be looking for performance errors rather than errors based on ignorance.

3) He understands his own difficulties and anticipates the errors he may make.

4) He has confidence resulting from his ability to follow the process. The teacher's red marks are no longer so threatening because they have been diminishing throughout the semester. This illusion of progress (or sometimes the reality) helps his self-esteem.

Nevertheless, to underline the difference between his approach to Paper #1 and his approach to the last paper, I give a handout for a Step Six, consisting of a checklist and instructions, in order to help the student to discipline himself to get the task done methodically.

Here the student chooses from the list of error types- the ones which he thinks he personally needs to check for. Then he proofreads his composition backwards, beginning with the last sentence first, and puts a check for each sentence after he examines it.

This step is important because proofreading independently is a skill which the students will use in future semesters and which will help them even in non-academic areas of their lives. Everyone proofreads and makes corrections in his work, even the teacher.

The disadvantages of this step-by-step method are probably obvious. The process would work better if it were individualized because all the students in a class are not ready to move on to a new phase at the same time. Although some tailoring of the process can be made to accommodate individual differences- an extra hint about where to find a checked error or about what kind to look for- the number of students in a class often prevents much of this. Also in one semester it is impossible to follow the ideal procedure of trying all proofreading steps for each new grammar point taught. But the worst drawback is that the teacher must collect and evaluate each set of papers twice. Of course, one of the readings can be more limited than the other: the instructor may read quickly for errors the first time and make comments on the second draft, or vice-versa. But there is no escape from the fact that the procedure takes time- class time and teacher time.

Nevertheless, I have enjoyed working with this process for several reasons. It gives a rational, graspable form to a task that at first seemed nebulous. It provides a sense of direction to the task by charting the way from one goal to the next. It frees a student to concentrate on communicating his ideas first, his error hunt being confined to an entirely separate point in the process. It makes

a student truly learn (and possibly remember) because he discovers his errors himself. And finally, it may result in a reduction in errors in the first draft. While this goal isn't attained by all students, the overall effect is that the class reduces its error production, and the last set of papers is better in this respect than the first.

Finally, it is important to look at errors and error correction in perspective. In proportion to other parts of the writing process, the hunt for errors should be rather small. The step must be there, but not at the expense of an emphasis on good communication or respect for what the student has to say. Mina Shaughnessy reminds us: ". . . errors count, but not as much as the English teacher often thinks." Writing must not be treated as only a method for eliciting correct grammatical forms. In addition, the teacher must be aware that errors will never disappear entirely. Working with classifying types of errors, as we do with this method, we can see progress perhaps in a reduction in the categories of errors rather than in the total instances of error. This we must also take as a sign of progress. Finally, errors may in fact show that a student is acquiring new skills. As a student learns more, he meets more possibilities for mistakes. Basic writers, as well as non-native learners, quickly see that it is easy to avoid an error by avoiding the troublesome structure altogether. A student who never writes a dangling modifier, for example, may never write any kind of an introductory modifier at all. Total absence of error, like total absence of bacteria, may only be a threat of another kind of problem. The task of the teacher is to view mistakes realistically and in proportion to the total communicative skills of the student. This proofreading method may contribute to the understanding of a small part of the whole.